

Testimony of
Mayor Stanley Mack
Aleutians East Borough
Before the
House Natural Resources Committee

**H. R. 2801, - “The Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Refuge and Wildlife
Enhancement and King Cove Safe Access Act of 2007”**

October 31, 2007

Good Afternoon, Chairman Rahall, Congressman Young, and other members of the Committee. My name is Stanley Mack and I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and tell you about the Native village of King Cove on the Alaska Peninsula where I was born and raised. My Aleut ancestors have lived and subsisted in the King Cove area for more than 4,000 years.

I come in front of you today to testify in favor of the “Izembek and Alaska Peninsula Refuge and Wildlife Enhancement and King Cove Safe Access Act of 2007”. This bill is critical for the indigenous Aleuts, and we have come a very long way to tell you why. In addition to my personal life experience and knowledge that I will share with the committee today, I am also the mayor of the Alaska Aleutians East Borough, the local government equivalent to a county in the lower 48. Six communities, having a total population of about 2,500, make up the Aleutians East Borough.

Mr. Chairman, the passage of this bill is a win-win situation for all interested parties - the U.S. Government; lovers of wildlife and wilderness; and the Aleut people. You have before you a proposed land exchange of an unprecedented magnitude. More than 61,000 acres of land from the King Cove Corporation and State of Alaska are being offered to the federal government in exchange for 1,800 acres. Of these 61,000 acres being offered to the federal government, more than 45,000 acres are being recommended for wilderness status. What the bill provides is 206 acres for a road corridor through a very small portion of the Izembek Refuge. Approximately 97 acres would be in the wilderness section of the refuge.

Why Have We Asked for a Road Link for Decades Between the Two Communities?

Cold Bay is the 3rd largest airport in Alaska with a 10,000’ main runway and a 6,500’ crosswind runway and our only access to the outside world. It was built by the US military in 1942 with help from the residents of King Cove as part of the Aleutian campaign. It is one of the most accessible airports in Alaska, and its existence in Cold Bay is the primary reason for Cold Bay’s ability to continue to exist. Contrast that to the community of King Cove, which is about 10 times larger than Cold Bay, only 30 miles away, and we rely on an airstrip precariously located between two, volcanic mountain

peaks.

Flights are subject to the extreme weather that we experience throughout the year with high winds and periods of thick fog being the most common culprits, resulting in delayed or canceled flights about 50% of the time. The 11 air fatalities, in and around the King Cove to Cold Bay corridor since the early 1980's, are another testament to our weather conditions. Our problem is having safe, reliable, affordable, and dependable access to the Cold Bay airport.

Our weather is some of the most treacherous in the world with 15-20 foot seas in winter and winds often more than 50 miles per hour throughout the year. In winter, we are further tormented with storm winds in excess of 100 mph. In summer, we are plagued by dense fog.

Also, please try to imagine our surprise and frustration when we learned that federal legislation made a "wilderness" out of the Izembek Refuge lands with no consultation with the Aleut people of King Cove. King Cove Aleuts eventually came to the difficult realization that their federal government, and other Izembek Refuge user groups, did not even care enough to ask what the area's indigenous residents had to say about this designation. And because there's no road between King Cove and Cold Bay, the 800 residents of King Cove can't avail themselves to a world-class airport that members of their families helped to build. So this is why we continue to lobby for a road that we believe has been unfairly kept from us and is a common sense solution to our problem.

But, we do acknowledge that the Congress tried to solve our transportation problem about ten years ago with the King Cove Health and Safety Act. Unfortunately, the Act has failed to solve our problem. After working for almost a decade on a marine link under the terms of the Act, it is clear that this bill was passed in the good faith notion that a hovercraft and/or ferry would solve our transportation problem. It is now equally clear that it will not work for us as a long-term solution.

The hovercraft is built and operational in King Cove, at least on those days when our weather is agreeable, meaning the winds are lying down. This is what we know now that we didn't know when Congress granted us this funding:

- 1) The hovercraft does not meet the expectations of the feasibility report. Given the variability of the winds and weather, we cannot forecast the operational windows that will give us reliability. It is clear that the hovercraft will not be able to operate anywhere near a 12 month/365 day schedule. Current conditions allow about 80 % operations, but this will go down once the winter weather begins in earnest. This kind of uncertainty will simply not provide the people of King Cove the health, safety and quality of life they deserve.
- 2) It is prohibitively expensive to operate the hovercraft now and costs will only go up. Given the choice between a hovercraft and conventional ferry, the hovercraft had the smaller operational cost. It's like a public transit system anyplace in the United States requiring a major governmental subsidy. A copy of the financial pro forma is available on our web site (www.izembekenhancement.org). Detailed financial projections have

concluded that a \$500,000 to \$700,000 annual subsidy is going to be required. This annual subsidy is simply not in the realm of fiscal or political reality for a government organization the size of the Aleutians East Borough. Therefore, our common sense solution remains the road.

Many Roads Already Exist in the Izembek Refuge and Wilderness.

We have heard talk of impacts about waterfowl and caribou from the road we must have. There is concern of setting a “precedent” of allowing a new road in the Izembek wilderness. Today, there are more than 14 miles of roads, traversing the Izembek Wilderness and another 35 miles in the Izembek Refuge. **In fact, there are roads that lead and are used today to the real heart of the Izembek Refuge, the eelgrass beds of the Izembek Lagoon.** You can trailer your boat and drive it right to the Izembek Lagoon where the internationally significant migratory waterfowl stop for about two months in the fall. (See 1995 letter from G. Siekaniec attached).

The land that is called Izembek (a name "bestowed" by a Russian in 1827) has been the Aleut people's backyard for 4,000 years. The land that is designated the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge (a name "bestowed" by the federal government, without anyone in King Cove being consulted) has been King Cove's backyard now for almost 50 years. Aleuts will be here, living and caring for this land, even as the names on maps may change. I suggest that we know how to “leave no mark” on the land, otherwise how do you square the successful co-existence of our people with this land for all these centuries? It is nonsense to suggest that we would risk damage to the land that feeds us.

Mr. Chairman, Aleuts don't need a regulation to define wilderness for them. We grew up in this wilderness. We have hunted and fished in this wilderness all our lives. We know our grandchildren and their grandchildren will do the same. We need the freedom, safety and peace of mind of having a road connection to the Cold Bay airport.

What HR 2801 Provides

Mr. Chairman, HR 2801 authorizes a land exchange of 61,723 acres of State and King Cove Corporation land of which 45,493 acres will be designated as wilderness by this bill. This will be the first wilderness designated in a national park or refuge Alaska in over 25 years. In return, the State of Alaska will obtain a 206 acre road corridor and a 1600 acre island near Kodiak which the Coast Guard will soon surplus. The bill requires special protection for the environment. Please understand this is a single lane, gravel road.

Finally, let me emphasize that the road will be constructed with highway trust funds through the State of Alaska. We are not asking for federal funding to construct or maintain this road.

Mr. Chairman, we love our rugged homeland, but this is a life and death issue to the Aleut people. We are completely supported by all local governments, our tribes, the State of Alaska, the Aleut Corporation, and the Alaska Federation of Natives in this endeavor.

We must have this road for our people to have a quality of life that all Americans expect and to protect the life, health, and safety of the indigenous Aleuts and all people in King Cove. To ensure that Congress will act on request, we and the State of Alaska have proposed an unprecedented land exchange which will benefit all Americans.

We want to thank the State of Alaska and Governor Sarah Palin and her predecessor Frank Murkowski for the state's strong support of this proposal. The state has truly been a partner to us every step of the way. We also want to thank the Aleut Corporation, the Agdaaugx Tribe and the Alaska Federation of Natives for their strong support. We also want to thank the shareholders of the King Cove Corporation for putting its own resources, the land, into this proposed exchange. The key lands at Mortensen's Lagoon are a critical part of this proposal and could only have been made available because of the willingness and need for the King Cove shareholders to take care of the life, health, safety and quality of life of the King Cove residents.

In your consideration, please let science, common sense and fairness be the standards used to evaluate our offer. We urge this Committee to approve this bill.

Conclusion

I want to close with a passage from a book which describes the difficult situation which the exchange will address. Noted author Tony Horwitz, author of the popular bestseller ("Confederates in the Attic") described the wind in King Cove in his book "Blue Latitudes" which tracked the legendary voyages of Capt. James Cook:

"The wind blew so hard that I (Horwitz) was almost crawling on all fours by the time I reached the end of the pier." Quoting one of the King Cove locals: "This is a nice day today. Last month we clocked the wind at one hundred thirty seven miles an hour."

Horwitz also quoted Capt. James Cook—"This country is more rugged than any part we had yet seen."

This bill is the only way to truly solve the King Cove issue. It is fair and just to the American people and to the people of King Cove. Mr. Chairman, we urgently ask that the Committee pass this bill. It is critical to the needs of our people. They are Americans that deserve the same quality of life that other Americans enjoy. I thank you for your time and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Submissions for the record:

1. Alaska Federation of Natives Resolution
2. Agdaaugx Tribal Resolution
3. Aug. 7, 1995 - Letter from Greg Siekaniec, Izembek Refuge Manager
4. Questions and Answers on HR. 2801
5. Northern Economics Study re: Hovercraft

6. "Blue Lattitudes"--Excerpt

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